Shani Orgad

Caring enterprise in crisis? Challenges and opportunities of humanitarian NGO communications

Book section

Original citation:
Originally published in Seu, Irene Bruna and Orgad, Shani, (eds.) Caring in crisis? Humanitarianism, the public and NGOs. Palgrave Macmillan, London, UK, pp. 83-109. ISBN 9783319502588

Chapter 6

Caring enterprise in crisis?

Challenges and opportunities of humanitarian NGO communications

Shani Orgad

In his seminal study of the sociology of deviance, Howard Becker (1991 [1963]) coined the term 'moral entrepreneur' to refer to an individual, group, or formal organization which assumes responsibility for persuading society to develop or to enforce rules that are consistent with its own ardently held moral beliefs. Becker observed that moral entrepreneurs can become rule creators, by crusading for the passage of rules, laws, and policies against behaviors they find abhorrent, or rule enforcers by administering and implementing these rules. The former type of moral entrepreneur – the moral crusader – has a close affinity with humanitarian motives. The crusader is not satisfied by the existing rules, 'because there is some evil which profoundly disturbs him [sic.]. He [sic.] feels that nothing can be right in the world until rules are made to correct it. He [sic.] operates with an absolute ethic' (ibid: 145).

Humanitarian and international development NGOs are a potent example of moral entrepreneurs, specifically, crusaders. Disturbed by the suffering of millions, they seek not only to alleviate that suffering but also and crucially to transform the conditions which produce and sustain that suffering. This applies especially to organizations focused on international development and an ambition to go beyond emergency relief, to remove the root causes of that suffering, e.g. Oxfam, ActionAid, Save the Children, Plan, Concern and

Care.[i] However, while emergency-focused NGOs, such as Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC), and UNICEF limit their efforts to saving lives at risk, they too operate within and contribute to what, following Becker, we call *the moral enterprise of caring*: a concerted process of creating awareness of distant suffering, and crafting of the moral fabric in response to that suffering. Thus, NGOs are active promoters of the morality of care: they identify issues related to distant suffering, create awareness of them, and seek to cultivate what Stan Cohen (2001) calls a culture of acknowledgement: acknowledging the suffering of others and acting on it.

Communication underpins this enterprise. In order to raise awareness of distant suffering, influence the shaping of the moral fabric, and mobilize action, NGOs rely on the production and dissemination of images and accounts of suffering. It is largely through representations of distant suffering and its relief that NGOs seek to shape the moral fabric – to help to produce 'cosmopolitan subjects [who] gain awareness of the suffering of others and partake of a global humanitarian ethos' (Nolan and Mikami, 2012: 55). Significantly, it is through the production and dissemination of humanitarian communications, such as appeals and campaigns and appeals, that NGOs seek also to raise money. In fact, as Ngo practitioners explained in their interviews, fundraising is often the *primary* short-term goal of humanitarian campaigns and appeals.

There would therefore seems to be a tension between what some describe as the *ethical* goal - of educating, mobilizing social action, and influencing long-term social change, and the *instrumental* goal (particularly of fundraising) of humanitarian communication. Chapter 2 showed the vividness of this tension in the public's imagination: monetary donation, as it is constructed by current NGO communications, is seen as dehumanizing the interaction

with the sufferer/beneficiary and antithetical to what the 'purer' and more 'appropriate' goal of humanitarian action ought to be. Critiques of humanitarian representations stress a similar tension: the role of humanitarian appeals and campaigns in raising funds is often seen by critics as secondary and less important and valuable than improving spectators' understanding, and inspiring their care and action in the form of demonstrating, signing petitions, and engaging in actions addressed to political institutions in order to reduce the suffering of the unfortunate (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2013 Vestergaard 2009).[ii] For example, in the highly influential book *Distant Suffering,* Luc Boltanski insists that 'paying' (monetary donation to a humanitarian cause) is a lesser and weaker form of humanitarian response than 'speaking', and is incapable of facilitating development of a politics of pity (Boltanski 1999: 19). Situated in discussions of the tension between the ethical and the instrumental in humanitarian communication and the humanitarian field more broadly, in this chapter, our focus is on humanitarian communication as a practice: how NGOs think about, plan, select, and produce appeals, campaigns and messages. This focus informs an approach that seeks to link together the ethical and instrumental goals/orientations of humanitarian communication, by situating the practice of *making* humanitarian communication within *both* its material conditions and the 'ethical rationalities' (Nolan and Mikami 2012: 60, drawing on Calhoun 2008).

The discussion in this chapter focuses on how NGO practitioners involved in the making of different aspects and forms of humanitarian communication perceive their organizations' role, image, ethos, and practice. We look at how practitioners account for their communications practices and how their understanding of their organizations' goals, structures, and values, and the political and economic conditions within which they operate, shape their decisions about how to communicate distant suffering and appeal to the public.

We deliberately focus exclusively on the communication NGOs address to the public ('individual donors'), and do not discuss other important communication forms and practices, e.g. messages addressed to major donors, governments, and other stakeholders, aimed at securing support and legitimacy for NGO operations.

The discussion is based on an analysis of in-depth interviews with 17 NGO professionals in 9 UK-based humanitarian emergency and international development NGOs, responsible for the design and production of communications about international development, humanitarian crisis, and human rights violations. The NGOs whose professionals we interviewed include ActionAid, Amnesty International, Care International, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), Concern Worldwide, Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), Oxfam, Save the Children, and Plan UK. We were interested, specifically, in 'externally facing' professionals who address the UK public and are actively involved in aspects of the production and dissemination of communications on international development and humanitarian issues. Our interviewees include practitioners engaged in planning, designing, and producing humanitarian and development communications across three key NGO department (or discipline) clusters:(1) Advocacy and Campaigns, (2) Communications, Branding, Media, and 'Public engagement', and (3) Fundraising, Marketing, Individual Giving (Table 1). We aimed at a mix of sizes and longevity of NGOs, positions/roles, and seniority of individuals.

[Insert table 6.1 here]

The interviews were deliberately open-ended to allow practitioners to describe what they saw as most central, important, and/or challenging and difficult in their practice. Interviewees were given a broad description of the study's purpose. They were asked first to

describe their role; subsequent interviewer interventions were minimal. Interviewees were assured confidentiality and anonymity; thus, in the analysis observations sometimes are generalized, and details of specific campaigns and communications that might identify speakers and/or NGOs have been removed.

The interviews with NGO professionals revealed individuals and organizations working under immense pressures and constraints including limited resources, financial cuts, public scrutiny and criticism, government pressure to demonstrate impact, and a work culture driven increasingly by the generation, measurement and auditing of data and quantifiable indicators.[iii] The purpose of the discussion below is to reflect on some of the ways in which these professionals talk and think about their practice *within* this context, and to highlight ways in which current approaches to communicating with the public might be strengthened and improved.

NGO practitioners discussed three types of relationships that they consider central to their practice of humanitarian communication: (1) NGOs and the UK public; (2) UK public and beneficiaries; and (3) NGOs and their 'beneficiaries'. Although very aware of the charged connotation of the term 'beneficiaries' (see discussion of the book's working definitions in Chapter 1), we use it here since it was used frequently by our interviewees. The three types of relationships map onto the 'humanitarian triangle' introduced in Chapter 1, and should help the reader identify links and tensions between the NGOs' view and the public's – an aspect we develop in Chapter 9, when drawing together the strands of the analysis.

[Insert Fig 6.1 here]

There is also a fourth relationship - between NGOs and other NGOs and the sector more broadly, which concerns how inter and intra-organizational politics shape the communications NGO produce. This relationship is examined at length elsewhere (Orgad, 2013); here we show how it might interfere with and shape the three primary relationships constituting the humanitarian triangle.

1. **NGO-Public**

As already mentioned, we interviewed 'outward-facing' professionals whose task it is to address the UK public through communication. It is, therefore, not surprising that interviewees referred continuously to their existing and desired relationship with their addressees – the public. A campaigns director in a large international development NGO described his mission and that of similar NGOs as inextricably dependent on creating a change *in the public* they address:

> [Our NGO] is not interested in making a little dent in poverty in a few people's lives. [Our NGO's] mission is to overcome poverty and suffering. And Save the Children has a similar mission, Oxfam, Action Aid has a similar mission, Christian Aid has a similar mission. They all talk in this realm of almost dream state, that we want a world without poverty in it… if you genuinely accept that as your mission, you have to be radical about what you think and what you do! …The current system and the current society – so kind of, big system, human system – is currently clearly not delivering on that promise, and it won't deliver on that promise if all we look for is incremental policy change. The only thing that can genuinely hope to deliver at that

> level is social change, is *when societies accept different things as being acceptable or normal* (italics added).

This account may not necessarily represent all humanitarian NGOs and may, more accurately, reflect the mission of organizations that aim also to eradicate the root causes of suffering as opposed to emergency-focused organizations. In particular, it illustrates the notion of NGOs as moral entrepreneurs crusading (to use Becker's term) for that "almost dream state" of a world without poverty and suffering, and their ambition to craft a new moral fabric. What this interview extract also illustrates vividly is the huge hopes and expectations projected by some NGOs onto the public: that they will "accept different things as being acceptable or normal" and deliver the promise of achieving an "almost dream state". However, other practitioners, especially from smaller NGOs and those from NGOs focused on providing an emergency response and saving lives, expressed more contained expectations of the public. A communications manager in a medium-sized emergency-NGO explained:

> Most people are more interested in their football team and what celebrities are doing and maybe what people are wearing. I mean, I'm not condemning them for it at all…. Do we want to put [time, energy, effort and critically, resources] into seeking to reach segments of the population who really don't think they're interested, might as well not be interested, [or] may never give us money? Is that something that we consider a significant target audience? Does Fundraising (department) think that for fundraising purposes it could work? Is there an advocacy objective to doing this?... Is that important? These are discussions we have internally… we need to decide, you know, where do we prioritize our time and resources.

This extract reflects very clearly how the ethical ambitions underpinning NGOs' communications and their hopes of influencing the public are inseparable from the material conditions within which the communications are produced. Ambitious long-term goals of re-educating society to "accept different things as being acceptable or normal", as the campaigns director cited above described it, are probably only possible (to declare and follow) in large organizations with considerable resources, recognition, and legitimacy; more 'modest' ad-hoc goals are shaped fundamentally by the material reality of more constrained resources. Thus, NGOs' approach to and relationship with the public are always situated in and shaped by *both* ethical and instrumental rationalities.

How do NGO communicators see the public they address? Professionals often described the UK public as generous, especially when responding to humanitarian emergencies – a view that is congruent with how members of the public view themselves, as expressed by audiences in our focus groups (Chapter 2). Some practitioners referred in particular to the UK's historically distinct charity culture and global-outward orientation as enhancing the tendency and willingness to give to charity and to help distant others. A media manager in a large international development NGO observed that:

> It's this kind of an extraordinary thing about Britain, people… they're basically not Little Englanders; people do think 'there is a need out there and I will help them'. I'm not saying that they're kind, sort of not skeptical about international aid … but I think in terms of recognizing need abroad and responding to it, I think everything that we've seen is just that no matter how tough times are here people in Britain think, you know, no, 'I've still got enough to help', which actually is really extraordinary.

However, several interviewees –mostly fundraisers –distinguished between the generosity of those willing to make money donation and those who are more likely to exhibit their generosity by donating their time and energy. For instance, a fundraising director in a large international development NGO observed:

> We have a people… who do stuff for charity but it's more about them doing a sponsored walk or being a hub of their community, being seen to do... they're very active people; they like to do lots of things and some of the things are done for charity, kind of thing. [Others] are far more, sort of, cerebral and considered, and people who are much more likely to want to campaign and support…. They're going to be much more demanding and much more likely to give their time and energy and contribute to an online discussion or whatever … In terms of giving cash they're probably less… They are actually also very generous but perhaps not as proportionately generous as you would think given the level of interest, if you see what I mean?

For the average fundraiser, individual donors who are generous with money are more valuable than those generous with their time and other types of action. The fundraiser cited above even implies that some of the supporters who engage with his NGO's cause through non-monetary forms, for example by doing sponsored walks, are motivated by wanting to be 'seen to do' rather than a genuine desire to help. However, for professionals in other departments in the same NGO as that of the fundraiser, such as members of campaigns and advocacy for example, the time and/or action-generous supporter could be as or even more important and valuable. In planning communications, this tension frequently is evoked: which target-audience should be prioritized? Which type of 'generosity' should the

communication tap into, and is it possible for a campaign or appeal to address and provide effective channels for both types of donors and satisfy their desire to help?

Questions such as these, as several interviewees admitted candidly, can be contentious. They reflect and often are inseparable from larger intra-organizational tensions and, specifically, the tension between a short-term orientation, usually emphasized by the fundraising and marketing professionals, and a longer-term orientation, focused on changing perceptions, nurturing a different imagining of development, and dispelling myths, commonly emphasized by campaigns and advocacy professionals (for a detailed discussion, see Orgad 2013). Most of the professionals we interviewed felt that this tension between the opposing 'logics' of these departments was difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. A senior campaigns manager in an international development NGO described it as a split between "two parallel universes":

> At the moment it's two parallel universes. …There are attempts in many NGOs, including my NGO, to try and bridge that a little bit. […] but even though we would like at this point to change it, the results and the data tell us that it [long-term communication of development issues that does not focus on severe neediness] doesn't work.

By "doesn't work", the campaigns manager refers, of course, to doesn't generate money. The fundraising and campaigns departments are "like parallel universes" because they have radically differing definitions of what "works".

NGOs' views and address of the public and the communications they produce are shaped considerably by these organizational tensions. Several interviewees explained that, in light of increasing financial pressures, their organization and other NGOs are resorting to

emergency communication – short-term, urgent, often very emotional, shocking communications that is focused on severe neediness and vulnerability and addresses the public primarily, if not exclusively, as monetary donors. This tendency is exacerbated by the 'datafication' of the professional field of humanitarian communication. As the campaigns manager cited above recounted:

> Especially in fundraising – what do you call this? –there's data, there's data, there's data! Particularly in direct marketing fundraising techniques – that's very data-driven. So, if you ask people to do something different and there's no data to support you then you are asking them to operate outside of their comfort zone, where the investment that you put into something might not actually result in what you expected it to… But if …. if you have no data to show, if you have no evidence to show that yes, that will happen with this new messaging, then you are outside of your comfort zone.

The adoption of data-driven approaches is exacerbated by increasing government pressure on NGOs to demonstrate 'impact' in quantifiable terms and public criticism and demands that NGOs demonstrate impact in measurable ways. Interviewees admitted that these pressures push many NGOs towards the production of communications whose impact can be clearly demonstrated: "invest £10 in order to get £100" is a clear message, observed the campaigns manager; anything else that cannot be formulated in these terms, she said, is "outside of the comfort zone".

Thus, in the climate in which NGOs operate currently, addressing messages to the public that call exclusively or primarily on their awareness, attention, and non-monetary actions seems extremely difficult, if not impossible. Practitioners – including those working in

fundraising and marketing – are aware that this address and its related short-term approach of 'pulling at the heartstrings', geared primarily towards raising money donations, is problematic in the long run. They admit that it contributes to creating what we might call emergency 'inflation', which, in turn, may reinforce a sense among the public of being bombarded with messages demanding their help, and may promote fatigue, resistance, and withdrawal – evidence of which we discussed in Chapter 2. Yet, at the same time, professionals feel that alternative approaches "outside the comfort zone" are very risky, difficult to justify, and, thus, increasingly unpopular.

Being aware of these constraints, how do NGO professionals think that the public views their organizations and communications? On the one hand, most professionals we interviewed believe that the UK public generally has a positive view of NGOs and the work they do. They described trust and loyalty as central aspects of audiences' relations to their own NGO, and to the humanitarian and international development sector. Many reported on their NGO's internal research of its supporter-base as showing high levels of trust. This comment from a fundraising director in a large international development NGO was typical:

> The audience … they've got a lot of trust in [our NGO], and other big NGOs and the like. They trust you guys know what you're doing, and you spend the money as you see fit.

Several practitioners referred to the myth that in the past was repeatedly corroborated by popular surveys, that NGOs are among the institutions enjoying the highest level of trust in the UK. "Charities have traditionally held up well against politicians, journalists, and you know, probably even more so these days", said one marketing director. They admitted that

this trust might be in decline, but only in the context of the decline in trust overall, “Well, all institutions [are] generally going down”, another marketing director explained.

On the other hand, practitioners admitted also that there was a problem – some even spoke of a crisis - in UK public’s relation to and perception of NGOs and international aid. For example:

> We have disillusioned people by overselling! (Communications manager, international development NGO).

> [Make Poverty History]… essentially you made a promise that cannot be delivered; although it was a very catchy thing, very inspirational. But actually you realize… that kind of works against you, doesn’t it? After one year we disbanded… poverty cannot be ended because it’s too complex. …How do you then go back to your supporters years after and say: we still haven’t managed to arrive at this? (Campaigns manager, international development NGO).

As the second quote above demonstrates, professionals reflected on the public’s perceived disillusion with international aid following campaigns such as Make Poverty History, and the general intensified scrutiny of NGO operations and practices. The consequences of this are far from simple to manage. As the campaigns manager cited above put it, “how do you then go back to your supporters years after and say: we still haven’t managed to arrive at this?” While only a few interviewees were as open about experiencing a sense of crisis in their relations with the public, many described the efforts they and their NGOs invest in building and trying to rehabilitate relationships with the public (thus, admitting, implicitly, that these relationships were troubled and in need of repair). A branding manager in a large

international development NGO spoke of the desire to win back audiences' loyalty, like an abandoned lover, seeking to re-engage the partner who has left, by demonstrating changes to demeanor:[iv]

> it's about them [audiences] believing in us and what we give them by way of a communications experience that *will bring them back to us*…that will *make them love us* I suppose in hippy terms.[…] We need people to give us money. We need our business to work. It's what we add on top of that that will make us memorable, that will *create this love in our audiences*, that will *bring them back to us*, and that will actually potentially change them as well (italics added).

In this context, this and almost all the other interviewees, described the relationship they seek to build with the UK public as a 'journey'; a metaphor they used to describe a relationship that grows, matures, and endures over time. Interviewees often exploited the idea of taking the public on a journey to suggest an alternative to the ad-hoc, emergency-related communications produced by NGOs, and in particular as an alternative to the fundraising-driven approaches and 'transactional' engagement activities, oriented to an arm's length relationship, which end quickly. The idea of a journey is underpinned by a recognition that some things have gone wrong and, specifically, that NGOs' 'old ways' of addressing the public have contributed to fatigue, disillusion, and resistance. The journey they seek to initiate is a corrective, conciliatory effort,[v] tuned to audiences' needs and wants, to repair a 'broken' relationship.

Critics, such as Alex de Waal (1997: xvi),[vi] for example, would see such NGOs' self-criticism of their communication practices as merely ritualistic and rhetorical. However, we would stress that this recognition, at least among some professionals, that something has gone

wrong between NGOs and the public and that the relationship needs to be repaired, is significant. Such self-reflexivity could be productive insofar as it could inform the development of changing modes of representing beneficiaries and addressing the public. Evidently, over the last several decades, there have been changes in the patterns of humanitarian communication, which have been driven, at least partly, by the NGO sector's self-introspection and self-reflexivity.

However, while recognition of a fractured relationship and the effort to engage the public and sustain its commitment over time are no doubt crucial, the model that some NGOs seem to have adopted to achieve this raises some critical questions. More than half of our interviewees suggested that taking the public on a 'journey' implies the need to avoid challenging them or discomfiting them, at least initially. The implication was that, as the relationship with the public developed, people would be able to cope with more difficult feelings and information, but that it was important that these should not be introduced in the opening, initial phase. For example, a branding manager in a large international development NGO said that:

> We'd love to help them [audiences] see that they can be political *without it threatening them*; that takes time. So yes, we would, and we do that so we *don't whip people* against money, in other words, *softly* introduce the notion that they can actually make change politically, but lots of people don't feel that comfortable with it (italics added).

Rather than enabling audiences experience some level of discomfort from the encounter with distant suffering, the emphasis in this and some other accounts is on eliminating conflict - making audiences care about the suffering and needs of others, but *comfortably*.

Even those interviewees who admitted that in order to take supporters on a 'journey' it was necessary to disrupt them and remove them from their comfort zone, said that they were keen to avoid engendering feelings such as guilt, anger, or indignation. A campaigns manager explained:

> [We want to] appeal to the feeling, to the emotion; but not to the, *not to the emotion that is about guilt or shame*: it is a shame that these people are poor; or guilt that my country is … I've got so much and you've got so nothing; or pity, which is some of what these feelings throw out – you don't want them to have that feeling; you want to *touch on the positive feeling* (italics added)

A communications manager in a small international development NGO echoed this:

> …But *not in a judgmental way*, it's saying to [our audience]…you have the agency to help do something about that. So I do*n't know that it would be layered with guilt* actually and that's certainly not how we're trying to position it (italics added).

Why have NGOs come to favor a 'cozier', guilt-free, and more positive approach to communicating with the public? Most clearly underlying this approach is the increasing pressure to raise funds. NGOs seem to have learnt from the consumer market that, in marketing their product (which one practitioner compared to food), they should not challenge or discomfit audiences – as exemplified by the above quotes. Rather, they need to focus on 'positive psychology' and, in approaching their audiences softly and gently, to elicit positive feelings. Interviewees mentioned companies and brands, such as Sky and Apple, from which they gain inspiration for their communications strategies. The aim, one fundraising manager explained, was to create a 'win-win situation', whereby both donors and NGO are satisfied and 'feel good'. It depended on a cautious attempt to engage the UK

public in caring for beneficiaries by eliciting positive emotions and emphasizing equality, comfort, pleasure, and ease. Another reason cited by some interviewees for adopting this 'positive approach' was based on evidence gathered via internal and external research, that people are put off by information which upsets and distresses them – an assumption that was challenged by our research (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 9). Therefore, as the communications director of a small-size NGO explained, "most of our [communication]…it's sort of hopeful in a way, it's *not* all sort of designed just to make you feel terribly sorry... It's *not* about distressing people."

Thus, on the one hand, there is a desire among NGOs to develop a long-term 'journey' relationship with the public. NGOs are seeking actively for ways to achieve this, for example, using social media platforms suited to informing and interacting with supporters on a continuous basis. On the other hand, the journey they try to establish through communication must be light, easy, fun and short: "If there are too many layers of thought and analysis that can get in the way", said a marketing director, "that works against us […] we need to be a short conversation!" Making humanitarian communication a short conversation involves converting an ongoing, long-term, complex issue into a snappy, fleeting simplified communication, which conveys urgency and a short-term tangible solution (in media bites which fit the news format), but risks discouraging audiences' long-term engagement – an issue we return to in Chapter 9.

2. Public-beneficiaries

Closely related to how NGOs regard their relations with the public is how they think about and try to shape the relations between the public and the beneficiaries or far-away

sufferers. In all the interviews, professionals discussed the relationship between the UK public and 'beneficiaries', and about ways to strengthen it and make it more effective. There was a very strong sense in professionals' minds of the huge distance between the UK public and beneficiaries. A communications manager in an international development NGO captured this when he commented that the issues he communicates to the public, such as poverty in developing countries, lack of clean water, or lack of access to education, are "so far out of people's realms of what is their reality, that they can't possibly begin to imagine". Why is it so difficult for the UK public to "begin to imagine" the suffering and needs of distant others? What do professionals think is the source of this distance and limited capacity for imagination?

Many identified contemporary culture and especially a consumerist lifestyle as key factors driving or at least exacerbating the wedge between 'us-here' (in Britain), and 'them-there' in zones of suffering. Not only do consumers find it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine far-away strangers whose life conditions are radically different from theirs, but, many argued, their preoccupation with consumerist goods and pleasures turns them inward. For instance, the communications director of a human-rights NGO observed:

> It's true that people are very parochial, and that people are, you know, self-interest drives them… when it comes down to 'are you happy for so much of your taxes to go to various countries?', then people start to be a bit more selfish, and maybe their generosity only really shows itself when there is an emergency and then they can see that the victims of that earthquake, or that flood, or whatever, need their money, or that famine, most often. So I don't think it's true that they couldn't care less, I really

> don't think that's true. But I think people are very parochial and people are driven by self-interest, particularly in difficult times, which is, I think, understandable.

As this comment shows, the perceived distance between the public and beneficiaries is not fixed: the *type* of humanitarian cause and, especially, its *temporality* – i.e. whether it is an emergency or a long-term issue – are considered key factors mediating this distance. The single, urgent, unexpected humanitarian disaster in which the sufferer is clearly visible is regarded by many as 'automatically' shrinking the distance, mitigating people's parochialism, inwardness, and self-interest, and engendering their compassion and generosity. Conversely, the more long-term and complex the issue, the greater the distance and the more pronounced people's inward-lookingness and self-interest. The *complexity* of the context of suffering is another key factor in mediating the distance between 'us-here' and 'them-there', interviewees observed. Fundraisers, in particular, emphasized that non-complex emergencies, especially natural disasters such as earthquake or flooding, are a 'successful' communication model. They argued it was a much simpler story to tell and to elicit people's response to (measured solely by monetary donation), compared to issue-led stories, e.g., about poverty. Communicating complex, long-term issues such as atrocities and 'man-made disasters', one fundraising manager said, makes "life harder," because "there's a few more dots to be filled in between the story and the fundraising". A related third factor that NGOs professionals see as influencing people's perceived distance from and capacity to respond to far-away in need is the *type of demand* they are presented with: overall, people would tend to respond more willingly to a call for one-off monetary donation for a far-away other in an emergency, interviewees observed, than to an ask for long-term engagement (commonly associated with regular donation) and commitment to improving the lives and alleviating the suffering of far-away others. Professionals commented that the financial

climate has exacerbated people's reluctance to commit to long-term forms of giving: the interviews were conducted during the recession in the UK, when many reports were showing that the public was less inclined to give to charity.

Thus, there is *no* inherent problem in the public's ability to connect to and care for far-away others. On the contrary, as NGOs argue and our research confirmed, people largely do connect to others in need in cases of humanitarian emergencies. According to NGOs, the blocks to connecting reside in how humanitarian issues appear to the public: urgent and short-term vs. ongoing and long term, 'simple' or complex, demanding one-off response in the form of money donation or long-term commitment and regular donation.

Relatedly, NGO practitioners observed that another important factor contributing to enhancing the distance between the public and beneficiaries was of their own making: the communications they produce. The following account from a senior campaigns manager in one of the UK's biggest international development NGOs is telling. In explaining why she thought NGOs were disappointed in the non-engagement by the public with humanitarian causes, this manager started by referring to the British public as the 'problem'. However, rather than characterizing their response as insufficient, inadequate, or disappointing, she paused, sighed, and reframed her observation, referring to how it is NGO communications that affect the public negatively:

> …the British public are so [pause, sigh]… the way to get the British public to part with money is to show them gravity of need, rather than to inspire them with something else… that's where we are at the moment. And the NGOs themselves are culpable for that. You know we've had, I don't know, fifty years of just churning out the same message about gravity of need, need, need, need, need; and the way to respond to

> that is give, give, give, give money. And over the last, it's only over the last, what, fifteen years, maybe twenty years, that through NGOs campaigning that that message… that there are other messages: that it's not about your money; it's about your action, your agency, and it's about their struggle, and it's about solidarity for their struggle, struggle of developing country people around that.

Other interviewees expressed a similar sense of the culpability of NGOs in communicating to the public in ways that contribute to distancing them from far away others in need, and to their disillusion with humanitarian causes. In this context, almost all practitioners talked, unprompted, about NGOs' portrayal of 'beneficiaries', and how these depictions negatively influenced public perception of the developing world. The public's perceived 'compassion fatigue', disillusion with humanitarian aid, and lack of care for far-away others is partly, but significantly an outcome of NGOs' messaging: "people think nothing's changed because we're showing them that nothing's changed. It's a helpless story we're telling", explained a campaigns manager of a large international development NGO. Some professionals expressed a sense of crisis around how NGOs portray the developing world and communicate to the UK public issues of international development: they implied that the communication produced, which is intended to facilitate and enhance the relationship between the public and beneficiaries, might instead be hampering it.

On the one hand, there is a feeling, which was highlighted by most interviewees, of weariness and fatigue with this debate about the portrayal of suffering and its effect on the public's perceptions and compassion. A communications manager in an emergency-focused organization captured this feeling when describing the debate over how NGOs portray and ought to portray their 'beneficiaries', as "a very well-flogged horse" he was "sick of talking

about." Furthermore, he argued, in contrast to the 'insignificant' non-material work of communication,

> the most important thing is the work we do is good; increase in funding means we can do more work and that is the most important thing - and people on the ground, are they interested in these ridiculous intellectual discussions about how they're being portrayed and your post-colonial theory from Sussex? Thank you very much! They're much more interested whether you get them some food or not.

However, at the same time, even this communication manager (despite his cynical critique of the preoccupation with questions of portrayal of victims), and most of the other interviewees, recognized the significance of this issue and expressed their deep dissatisfaction with existing formulas, patterns, and ways of representation. "We churn out the same stuff over and over again… people parody us as an industry; people parody our advertising and that's because we have... we communicate generally in quite formulaic ways" admitted a fundraising director in a large international development NGO.

Against the perceived huge distance between the public and beneficiaries, NGO professionals see their challenge and role as bridging or reducing the distance through their communications. A recurring theme in the interviews was professionals' efforts symbolically to create a sense among UK audiences of 'being there' – as if they shared the time and space of beneficiaries. For example, a senior communications manager said that were he able to achieve just one thing it would be to "take all the people in the UK and show them real poverty" in the global South, to overcome audiences' alienation from the far-away strangers in developing countries – alienation which, as we have seen, NGOs themselves admit to being partly culpable for cultivating.

In this context, NGOs have increasingly been employing immersive techniques, media technologies and genres aimed at 'transporting' the public into the zone of the beneficiaries. They seek to simulate proximity, making viewers feel as if they were on the spot. A communications manager in a medium-sized international development NGO described how:

> we made a film in 3D last year for the first time because we really wanted people to, sort of, feel that they were in the village… really try to, you know, make feel that they were in there and, you know, in the hut.

Recent similar examples include Amnesty International's immersive experience of life on the ground in Aleppo, Save the Children's augmented reality East African campaign, and Oxfam's Traces App, which invites people to use their mobile phones to discover an augmented 3D portal to digital content to learn more about the charity's work and make a donation. "Rather than telling audiences or asking them to read about the issue, these examples help them relate to what they are seeing in a unique and immersive way" (Cassidy 2015). Similarly, there are various 'makeover programs' designed to create a sense of one-to-one symbolic intimacy, where audiences seemingly are invited to share the spaces and experiences of beneficiaries (see Orgad and Nikunen 2015). The idea that is conveyed through such communications - and stressed by many of those professionals we interviewed - is that to understand and care for beneficiaries requires one to 'get closer', to become their intimate. Creating a feeling of 'being there' is seen by many as guaranteeing a capacity to imagine and understand the far-away other (Orgad and Seu 2014).

There would seems to be a paradox here: those professionals, whose job it is to mediate the experience of far-away beneficiaries on a mass scale, believe that what is required is the

intimate, *unmediated* one-to-one encounter with beneficiaries in order to both understand (cognitively) and care (emotionally) for them. The endeavor of NGO communication professionals to bring beneficiaries symbolically 'closer' to UK viewers, is intended to bridge the gap between 'us' and 'them', 'here' and 'there'. However, the problem with this model, which simulates proximity and intimacy with the 'other', is that it reinforces *physical* small scale intimacy with beneficiaries as idealized, while not actually enabling audiences (watching at home) to achieve it. As discussed in Chapter 2, this issue came up in the focus groups with the UK public: many participants expressed a desire for an embodied, close relation to those far-away others whom they help; they want a sense of 'connectedness', which is *not* mediated. However, simulating 'closeness' between viewers and far-away 'beneficiaries' via mediated forms (e.g., 'reality TV' programs, 3D films or interactive apps) can have the opposite effect of accentuating and highlighting the distance between giver and receiver. We return to this in Chapter 9.

3. NGO-beneficiaries

Overall, and somewhat surprisingly, interviewees did not talk much about beneficiaries or, at least, not explicitly. When they did, it was predominantly in relation to the portrayal of beneficiaries in humanitarian communication.

It is worth noting that practitioners used various terms, often interchangeably; 'victims' and 'beneficiaries' were the most common, followed by 'heroes' and 'survivors'. Terminology was dependent on the context, e.g., MSF, which focuses on providing medical assistance, refers to 'patients'. The majority of respondents were very aware of the connotations and

symbolic 'baggage' of using one term or another. For example, a communications director of an emergency-NGO commented:

> I don't like using the word victims…so, yes, we struggle, we've got guidelines that try and help us but we're trying not to put a label on somebody and emphasize their humanity, the fact that they're a person.
>
> Shani: Why wouldn't you call them beneficiaries?
>
> Communications director: …I hate the word beneficiaries.
>
> Shani: Why?
>
> Communications director: Well, because it's dehumanizing.
>
> Shani: Why?
>
> Communications director: Well, because they're people...
>
> Shani: And you don't feel they benefit from your services?
>
> Communications director: I hope they do! [laughter], I don't think there's any guarantee. Yes, you know, probably in there you'll find some literature somewhere where we have used the word beneficiaries, but I try not to. We are fighting a constant war against jargon, jargon and acronyms and we've got, you know, plenty of both. And it is difficult.

This brief account reveals how NGO practitioners' relations to beneficiaries are informed by ethical and instrumental motives simultaneously. In her daily practice, this communication manager feels a genuine sense of responsibility to represent the far away 'other' fairly, to emphasize his/her humanity, and to eschew dehumanization. At the same time, she is

concerned with instrumental considerations such as following her organization's guidelines and fighting the 'war against jargon' – considerations which are part of the increasing emphasis on professionalization and the pressures on NGOs for accountability and measurement mentioned by many interviewees. In this communications director's case, the ethical and instrumental motives seem to be in alignment – with both supporting her endeavor to humanize the beneficiaries in the communications she designs. However, in other cases, there were tensions and conflicts between and within the motives and rationalities propelling NGOs' relations with and depiction of beneficiaries. These tensions were perhaps most pronounced in the context of intra-organizational tensions between fundraising and communications and/or advocacy and campaigns departments.

As discussed earlier, and corroborated by other studies (e.g., Davis and Sireau, 2007; Nolan and Mikami, 2012), there is a major division within NGOs between fundraising and/or marketing-led and campaigns-led professionals and departments. The former tend to prioritize simplified messages, which 'tug at the heartstrings' for short-term eliciting of money donations; the latter often argue against these practices and favor communicating the gravity of the long-term structural problem. More specifically, the short-term fundraising orientation tends to push towards the portrayal of others as needy and vulnerable, based on the assumption that this type of depiction opens people's hearts and pockets. Fundraisers often cited data from both in-house research and external sources (e.g. market and academic research), which frequently confirmed that it is the image of the emaciated child rather than the active, self-sufficient, empowered individual that is most likely to translate into emotional engagement and result in more successful fundraising. The advertising agencies and marketing companies employed by many NGOs, reinforce this 'data-based' logic, which often supports the use of 'negative' representations of

beneficiaries. For example, various interviewees referred to the influence of Direct Response Television (DRTV), an advertising agency designed to elicit responses from consumers directly to the advertiser through telephone calls, websites, and text messages. It promises its clients, NGOs among them, 'cost-effectiveness' and an 'immediate and always measurable' response (www.drtv.co.uk). A fundraising manager described the typical visual product DRTV designs for NGOs as a way of "bringing people in": "You have a direct ask. … It's normally a story about an individual, like a child who may be malnourished. Help a child like this child and give us £5 month now to help children like this". One communications manager in a humanitarian NGO described "feeling sick" when she saw DRTV imagery of "helpless dying babies" juxtaposed against figures of direct audience responses.

By contrast, the long-term orientation tends to advocate the portrayal of beneficiaries as resilient, empowered agents, situated in the contexts of their communities and engaged in an activity geared towards improving their situations. However, this does *not* mean that certain groups and actors involved in humanitarian communications are 'ethical' and others are 'instrumental'. Rather, following Nolan and Mikami (2012), we want to highlight how *both* ethical and instrumental motives and objectives, simultaneously, if unevenly, drive NGO's approaches to the depiction of beneficiaries.

Practitioners accounted for genuine and thorny ethical concerns encountered in their daily practice of representing beneficiaries. For example, a communications director of a small international development NGO agonized:

> If I have one concern privately, it's notwithstanding the fact that we're genuinely trying to work in an integrated way in which the [beneficiaries] whom we work with,

> you know, are shown to have agency… nonetheless they still clearly are commodities, you know, they are the product that we are selling as it were.

Yet he and many other professionals experience a gap between recognition of these concerns and how they want or ought to represent beneficiaries, and their ability to actually do what they believe to be better under the structural, institutional, and fundamentally economic conditions within which they operate.

A fundraising director of an emergency-focused NGO revealed this contradiction when recounting a meeting of the industry's fundraisers in which he participated:

> I was talking about our own fundraising campaigns, it was a genuine frustration, I was producing these magazines that were going out in newspapers, doing our absolute best to make it interesting but really, you know, sometimes I think that what we send out is so boring. I'm really giving it my best shot and this fundraiser from another charity had a go at me, I mean, really quite aggressively saying: 'well, you know, just because they're boring doesn't mean to say that they don't work'! Like this. And I kind of thought, well, that wasn't my point, I wasn't talking about *your* fundraising, I was talking about *ours*. And then I looked at her and thought: 'wow, isn't that interesting, you clearly are very frustrated with what you see are the inadequacies of what you do and you're feeling defensive about it but then I guess you haven't been given the opportunity to do better'.

According to this fundraiser, NGO practitioners acknowledge the inadequacies of their representational practices, but yet feel constrained in their ability to overcome these inadequacies and to think "outside their comfort zone" as another interviewee (cited earlier) put it.

What does communicating outside the comfort zone and “doing better” really mean? Oxfam UK (in collaboration with Bond, WWF, and UK Aid) has been a leading light on this question, in particular, through their ‘Common Cause’ (Crompton 2010) and ‘Finding Frames’ reports (Darnton & Kirk 2011), which were cited by several interviewees. Oxfam has called for a shift from a transactional short-term approach, underpinned by what it described as ‘negative values’, to a ‘positive value’-based framing, oriented towards in-depth engagement with global poverty. However, some interviewees questioned the feasibility of applying this approach without substantially compromising the clarity of communication whose objective is fundraising. They argue that a complete move away from the transactional short-term approach is ‘too up in the clouds’, ‘theoretical’, and idealist. A marketing director stated bluntly that this approach ‘is a highfaluting theory from lots of clever people who sit in conference rooms and talk to one another about theories’, but one that he could not afford to implement if he were to reach his charity’s fundraising targets.

One way in which NGOs seem to try resolve or at least reduce the conflict between what they consider to be more ‘ethically-driven’ and ‘instrumentally-driven’ representations of beneficiaries, is by exploiting intimacy in their communications as a central trope. As we have argued elsewhere (See also Orgad and Seu 2014), when discussing their approach to representing ‘beneficiaries’ in appeals and campaigns, some interviewees referred to the image of the NGO worker and the beneficiary sitting side-by-side outdoors (e.g. “under a tree”), surrounded by nature, on the beneficiary’s (imagined) "turf" (e.g. village, mountain, field). Rather than western white ‘saviors’ rescuing ‘beneficiaries’ or ‘victims’ in the global South, NGOs prefer a conception of their beneficiaries as intimate ‘partners’ engaged in equal and fair relations. This view is evident in various current NGO communications, which construct beneficiaries as intimates of both NGO workers and audiences. Perhaps the most

recent development of this construction is the incorporation of virtual reality into humanitarian communication, mentioned earlier.

By employing a language and techniques that construct beneficiaries as the intimates of the NGO and the public, NGOs seek to construct for themselves and their audiences a unique, personal, and (virtually) embodied relationship with beneficiaries. 'Intimacy at a distance' (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Thompson, 1995) - a mediated, intimate, mostly non-reciprocal bonding with far-away others - seems to offer a response to criticisms of depictions of beneficiaries as *unethical and instrumental*: to mitigate and counter claims of offensive, patronizing, ethnocentric, dehumanizing representations of beneficiaries, geared merely towards fundraising, which perpetuate the unequal power relations between 'us' in the global North and 'them' in the global South (Cohen 2001; Chouliaraki 2013). At the same time, as a communication model, intimacy at a distance is not "too up in the clouds" and is capable of generating money and translating pity into monetary donation. While this model of intimacy might present NGOs with some constructive ways forward, both its short-term effectiveness and long-term impact remain to be fully seen. Furthermore, it raises some questions and problems when juxtaposed against the findings of our audience research (reported in Chapter 2). In Chapter 9 we discuss this and the other implications of bringing together the findings of NGO and audience research.

Conclusion

The final section of this chapter raises three critical questions concerning the approach, models, and strategies of communication described by the NGO professionals we interviewed.

The first issue concerns the notion that understanding and caring for beneficiaries is conditioned upon 'getting closer' and becoming their intimate. Arguably, there are some clear benefits to this emphasis – as indicated by NGOs' increasing adoption of augmented reality and other 'intimacy' and 'authenticity' techniques. At the same time, the stress on simulating closeness to beneficiaries and developing symbolic intimate emotional relations with them risks excluding other forms and ways of knowing, and modes of relations, which, potentially, would allow the public to relate to and understand humanitarian and international development issues in more diverse, complex, and less standardized ways. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 2, some members of the public expressed their appreciation of NGO communications that they felt educated them, without necessarily making them symbolic 'intimates' of far-away people in the global South. In addition, the danger with simulating proximity and intimacy with the 'other', through examples such as immersive 3D films, is that it reinforces the idea of physical closeness to beneficiaries as idealized, while obviously NGOs cannot actually enable audiences (watching at home) to achieve this. With the exception of specially-designed "immersion programs" (as one campaigns manager called them), which enable members of the public to go abroad and interact with beneficiaries, the majority of the channels NGO realistically are able to offer the public to engage with beneficiaries, are *not* personal, unique, and embodied, but rather are mass-mediated. Thus, the stress in NGO communication on personal, one-to-one, seemingly unique and unmediated intimacy with beneficiaries, might be feeding the public's desire for an embodied, close relation to those far-away others whom they help, while accentuating and highlighting that real closeness between giver and receiver is impossible. Furthermore, the (mediated) 'intimate' journey offered to audiences is non-reciprocal: supporters are invited to go on a 'journey', but the relationship with both NGOs

and beneficiaries is not truly two-way. The forms of interactions supporters are offered with NGOs and with beneficiaries are currently almost exclusively one-way and focused on monetary donation – a frustration that was strongly and repeated voiced in the focus groups discussed in Chapter 2.

Second, the model described by some interviewees of taking the public on a journey, generally seems to favor pleasurable, comfortable, and non-threatening relations; (seemingly) a 'win-win situation' as one fundraising director put it. The risk is that this type of 'light' and pleasurable journey is geared towards containment and even erasure of negative emotions such as rage, indignation, shame, and guilt – those emotions which propelled past successful humanitarian campaigning, advocacy, and communication (as well as fundraising) and remain pivotal to future humanitarian communication as a moral enterprise. Many of the practitioners interviewed, as well as other professionals working in the sector and scholars researching the subject, feel that NGOs may have moved some distance from the autonomous, passionate, fearless campaigning of past movements. Confronting the crisis many practitioners describe in relation to the sector's patterns of communication might necessitate a renewed commitment to the NGOs' role of moral entrepreneurs, i.e. agents who do not only or primarily appeal for momentary pity and money donation – however important these may be at specific moments – but also craft the moral fabric and invest in cultivating a broader culture of acknowledgement.

Finally, the current communication models NGOs are seeking to develop, struggle to reconcile the desired long-term dimension of the 'journey' with the short-term fleeting forms and genres of emergency communication. Our interviews with NGO practitioners

highlighted their preference for emergency-oriented genres and forms, mainly for fundraising reasons. A considerable part of NGO communication is comprised of ad-hoc, short-term appeals for monetary donation, which focus on short-term, low-intensity relations with beneficiaries and the issue. These types of appeals for one-off monetary donation to a humanitarian disaster are seen as 'effective' in 'cutting through' and diffusing many of the barriers to people's reaction to messages about distant suffering. However, in the long run, the dominance of the emergency model may weaken NGOs' efforts to cultivate the public's long-term awareness of and engagement with international development issues. As we saw in Chapter 2, the public experience difficulty in establishing and maintaining a meaningful sense of connectedness with humanitarian issues and distant sufferers *over time*. The emergency communication model – the 'short conversation' immediate, urgent, but fleeting message - seems ill-equipped to deliver messages about long-term change and to cultivate long-term commitment to humanitarian and international development causes.

In his seminal book *States of Denial,* Stanley Cohen (2001: 295) observes:

> The test of acknowledgment is not our reflex reaction to a TV news item, a beggar on the street, or an Amnesty advertisement, but how we live in between such moments.

The analysis presented here calls for NGOs to search for new ways to develop and strengthen the public's acknowledgement of and engagement with humanitarian causes, by better communicating with the public in between these moments, over the long-term and on a two-way basis, and connecting ad-hoc monetary donations to a broader, meaningful,

moral commitment. In Chapter 9 we develop this general call into a series of specific recommendations.